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ABSTRACT

This digest provides a review of current literature relating to sexual minorities and the ongoing dialogue surrounding multiculturalism and inclusiveness on community college campuses. A 1998 study conducted on the six San Francisco community college campuses indicated that more than 1 in 3 of 484 community college students surveyed had engaged in hate speech or hate crimes against individuals perceived to be gay or lesbian. Study of lesbian, gay, bisexual and transgendered (LGBT) students is complicated by scarcity of previous studies, reluctance of some LGBT students to self-identify, and professional repercussions against faculty, staff or administrators who may choose to study LGBT students. A lack of institutional support services and inadequate opportunities to interact with other LGBT students, faculty, and staff may play a significant role in sexual minority students' failure to persist. Recent changes in state and federal law seem to indicate that failure by community college administrators to protect these students may lead to legal action against administrators and institutions. Includes reference to an "Institutional Assessment of Sexual Minority Status Checklist" with twelve assessment areas by which an institution might evaluate whether it is meeting its LGBT student needs. Contains 12 references. (PGS)

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Participants in the ongoing dialogue surrounding multiculturalism and inclusiveness on community college campuses are beginning to incorporate the topic of sexual minorities — lesbian, gay, bisexual, and transgendered (LGBT) students — in the debate. This digest provides a review of current literature on the topic. Notably absent in the literature is research specific to community colleges; however, several publications have begun to address the topic of LGBT undergraduate students.

Obstacles in Studying LGBT Students

A number of problems complicate the study of the LGBT student population. First, since there are no data available on the number of LGBT students in American higher education, it is impossible to determine the size or prevalence of the LGBT student population on community college campuses. Current numbers are grounded in sociological studies dating back more than 50 years. Second, an obstacle to be understood when studying LGBT students is the identification of a population that, due to social stigma, may not wish to be identified. Any study of sexual minorities relies on self-reporting because, by definition, the "coming out" process is a form of self-selection; those who do not come out are never included in research efforts. Finally, this research is being conducted across a disparate set of disciplines, such as sociology, psychology, political science, law, and education, making comparisons difficult.

One reason for the paucity of study may be fear that faculty, staff, and administrators who wish to study LGBT students may be perceived as gay (Leider, 1999). Often, such perceptions are more than just a damper on an academic career; they can lead to the end of that career. According to Sanlo (1999), the mere perception of faculty or staff as gay may result in termination of employment in some states.

Hate Crimes

One area of concern to both researchers and the higher education community is anti-gay violence and harassment. Research in this area is complicated by the fact that many LGBT student victims fail to report crimes of this nature to campus or legal authorities (Downey & Stage, 1999). One researcher's response to this problem has been to study the perpetrators of anti-gay violence and harassment instead of their victims (Franklin, 1998).

Anti-gay sentiment toward LGBT students by their fellow students is a subject well represented in the educational literature on four-year institutions (Reinhardt, 1997). Findings from the only study to examine anti-gay violence and harassment on community college campuses (Franklin, 1998) indicate that the problem is more widespread than previously thought. Franklin's anonymous survey, conducted at six San Francisco Bay-area community colleges, indicated that of the 484 respondents, 24 percent had engaged in verbal harassment of individuals perceived to be gay or lesbian. Another 10 percent admitted to committing physical violence or threats of violence against presumed gay men or lesbians. In other words, more than 1 in 3 community college students had engaged in hate speech or hate crimes on the six campuses studied.

Student Development

Student development is another concern. It is well documented that college students undergo significant measurable change in factual knowledge, cognitive abilities, values, attitudes, and psychosocial development (Chickering and Reisser, 1993). In addition to these changes, LGBT students often undergo an additional and unique sexual identity process. A series of discrete steps in the process of identity formation are discernible. Cass's (1979) six-stage Theory of Homosexual Identity Formation informs much of the present work in the field. Present day researchers theorize five stages (Sanlo, 1998) while others identify four (Evans, Forney, and Guido-DiBrito, 1998). Regardless of the number of stages posited, it is now common to see students arriving at community colleges and four-year institutions already in some stage of this developmental process and seeking the services of student affairs professionals (Sanlo, 1998).

There are added challenges for those students whose identities are complicated by multiple group membership or rejection of sexual labels. Students of color who also happen to be sexual minorities are frequently confronted with the problem of identifying with one or the other group. In their racial group they may be subject to homophobic bigotry, while in their sexual identity group they may have to deal with racism and prejudice (Wall, 1991). There are those students, too, who engage in same-sex behavior but do not identify as gay, lesbian, or bisexual, who reject sexual labels altogether but who nevertheless experience confusion regarding their feelings and behaviors (Green, 1998). As LGBT students undergo the process of sexual identity formation in largely hostile community college environments, they may fail to persist to graduation or they may exhibit other problems, thereby necessitating intervention by the institution (Sanlo, 1998).

The Needs of LGBT Students

Many LGBT issues are common to community college campuses and four-year institutions. One is the "commuter campus syndrome." This syndrome, in which students attend classes but don't become involved in campus life, contributes to students' inability to establish relationships with LGBT peers or create a sense of LGBT community on campus (Sanlo, 1998). LGBT students living off campus with parents are especially affected, as are those working full- or part-time while attending college. Both situations adversely affect students' ability to become involved in campus-based LGBT activities.

A lack of institutional support services and inadequate opportunities to interact with other LGBT students, faculty, and staff, may also play a significant role in sexual minority students' failure to persist. Finally, administrative barriers to the formation of LGBT student groups may interfere with these students' abilities to form contacts and friendships. Typical of these is the practice of some institutions of printing the home telephone numbers of LGBT student group leaders in campus publications. For those students who may not be "out" to family or friends, this is a violation of their privacy. Making this information public may also leave these students vulnerable to anti-gay telephone harassment as well (Sanlo, 1998).

Conclusion

Few studies concerning LGBT students on community college campuses are being conducted. While we know little about these students, we do know that they are being subjected to harassment and hate crimes by their peers. Recent changes in state and federal law seem to indicate that failure by community college administrators to protect these students may lead to legal action against administrators and institutions. While a legal discussion is beyond the scope of this digest, it is clear that LGBT community college students have a set of needs that are clamoring for attention.

Resources

Two resources have become available to those working with LGBT students at postsecondary educational institutions. Edited by Ronni Sanlo in 1998, *Working with Lesbian, Gay, Bisexual, and Transgender College Students: A Handbook for Faculty and Administrators* is a practitioner's handbook that compiles together forty essays written by researchers and practitioners, who cover a broad range of topics pertinent to LGBT college students.

Improving campus life for LGBT students should begin with an assessment of the current state of campus efforts. Nan Ottenritter (1998) has created an "Institutional Assessment of Sexual Minority Status Checklist" containing twelve assessment areas by which institution's leaders may judge whether it is meeting its LGBT students' needs.

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